

Czechoslovakia and the Hungarian Revolution in 1956

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In 1956, the Czechoslovak authorities successfully suppressed all traces of a potential uprising. It can be stated that peace was not seriously disturbed in both the Czech and the Slovak territories, and no significant movement took place. The Czechoslovak society was not yet prepared for a political turn-over in the 50's. The cautious change of direction in 1953 and the economic reforms had borne their fruits by 1956, which prevented the spread of the revolution to Czechoslovakia. The pull and let go tactic of the authorities worked. Czechoslovakia pulled through the critical year of 1956 and she got stronger. Slovak Hungarians could choose between their survival as a minority and an uprising in autumn 1956. A sober deliberation excluded all steps leading to a Hungarian revolution. The Slovak Hungarians still had vivid memories of suffering, which they experienced after 1945. Worries of being accused of irredentism were strong and any support of Hungarian revolution was unthinkable.

[Czechoslovakia; Hungarian Revolution; 1956; minority question; Soviet Union; bilateral relations]

Introduction

Parliamentary elections were held in Czechoslovakia on 30th May 1948. Citizens could vote only for the united list of the National Front led by the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (CPC). This list received 89.2 % of all votes. Those who disagreed with the united list threw a blank slip in the poll box. Among the Hungarians, only the re-Slovakized citizens were allowed to vote. President Beneš did not sign the new constitution and resigned in protest (he explained his resignation with his poor health). Klement Gottwald was elected new president

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and Antonín Zápotocký became the new Prime Minister. Czechoslovakia lost its sovereignty; it became one of Stalin's satellite states, but it did not cut all economic connections with the western powers. Its special position was also shown by the fact that the Red Army did not station troops in the country due to the fact that Czechoslovakia was one of the early allies of the USSR.¹ After the change of regime, the highest political institutions (presidential office, parliament and government) got under Communist control. The Communists used political terror: they began the liquidation of their opponents and encouraged nationalisation in economy. Centralisation further strengthened after 1948. The Communist leadership considered Slovak national institutions dangerous, and hindered their efforts to gain independence.² In 1948, the Communist Party of Slovakia (CPS) merged into the CPC and got under the control of Prague. Although they retained the name CPS and the Slovakian party organisation also remained existent, their power and influence was significantly reduced: they became weak executive bodies. The Communist Party, similarly to other countries, started the creation of the new system with political cleansing. Politically active members of the civil parties of the previous regime were now regarded as criminals and 'traitors' and they were ostracised. Middle class and higher-rank people were considered as outcasts and their property was confiscated. Parallel to the purges, they started the construction of the legal system, the political institutions and economic fundamentals of the party state. They maximised land property in 50 ha. Farmers who did not want to join the cooperatives or who failed to meet the compulsory delivery requirements became outcasts as well. Economic leadership gradually shifted to the Communists; the majority of the population were soon employed by the state. Communists formed action committees which started widespread cleansing among the workers. Leading positions were filled by Communists often without any qualifications; party membership was the primary requirement. At the 9th congress of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, the construction of Socialism was marked as the main target of social development, and the first five-year plan was launched accordingly. Foreign policy was adjusted

¹ R. J. CRAMPTON, *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century and after*, London – New York 1994, p. 270.

² Ibidem.

to that of the USSR. On 25th January 1949, Czechoslovakia joined the COMECON, which united the satellite states in the Soviet Bloc. This guaranteed that these states became economically subordinated to the USSR. The organisation of the Warsaw Pact in 1955 strengthened this situation.

The Communists put churches under state control in Czechoslovakia in 1949. With the help of the State Security Office, they dissolved male monastic orders in 1950 and allowed only those female orders to exist which did some social mission. Several bishops were imprisoned, nine priests were put to show trials, and received sentences of 10–25 years. The Archbishop of Prague, J. Beran, was put under custody. An era of political trials began in accordance with Stalin's expectations. Several show trials took place from 1950 onwards. In 1952, the former General Secretary of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, Rudolf Slánský was sentenced to death and executed shortly after his removal. Several of his fellows received death or long prison sentences. Besides Slánský, the former Czechoslovak Foreign Minister, Vladimír Clementis was also executed. Until 1953, 233 people were sentenced to death in show trials and 178 people were executed. The State Security Office developed its network of agents to find the centres and the people of a possible resistance. The monetary reform of the government in 1953 turned many Communists and workers against the government. Many had lost a part of their savings. Although rationing was abolished real wages also decreased, which led to smaller protests and clashes. Several industrial centres in the Czech territories saw such protests. The authorities, out of fear of anti-government movements, lowered prices, in several steps in 1953–1955. Especially industrial products and some food became cheaper. The compulsory delivery amounts were decreased to one-fifth, the census of kulaks was suspended and special taxes were abolished. Reprisals against workers who had appeared in strikes were also suspended. Amnesty was declared giving a chance for the 'deceived' people. Arrangements to calm down the masses proved to be successful.³ After the death of Stalin, the authorities became more lenient and excessive measures happened less frequently. The Communist party was reorganised: the formerly so self-confident leadership became

³ K. KAPLAN, *Československo v letech 1953–1966*, 3. část, Praha 1992, p. 31.

uncertain after the death of Gottwald.⁴ In 1953, Prime Minister Antonín Zápotocký became President, Antonín Novotný (who was also President in 1957–1968) became General Secretary of the Central Committee of the CCP, and Viliam Široký became Prime Minister. The Central Committee of the CCP decided, in honour of Gottwald, that the presidential chair of the party would not be occupied any more, and the highest position will be the General Secretary. In the meantime, the Slovak civil nationalist group, led by Gustáv Husák, became increasingly isolated within the party. Political trials continued even after the death of Stalin. Leaders of the Slovakian Communist Party Gustáv Husák and Daniel Okáli were imprisoned after a show trial.⁵ This trial had an anti-Slovak attitude: Prague eliminated, as a preventive measure, the members of the Slovak National Council who supported the 'federal model'. They wanted to prevent the Slovak question, which threatened with succession, from getting to the agenda again. Prague handled the Slovak question as an economic rather than a national affair. The main problem was that the Czech territory was more developed than Slovakia. With the economic recovery programme the Slovak question was successfully postponed. The 10th Congress of the CCP decreased the accelerated pace of investment in July 1954, and they designated stabilisation and raising the living standard as new objectives. The ambiguity of the Czechoslovak leadership was shown by the erection of the Stalin statue in Prague in 1955; it was carried away in 1962. The Hungarian leadership, after having asked and received help from the USSR, Poland and Romania, decided to turn to Czechoslovakia for economic assistance in order to pull the country out of recession. The Hungarians considered the talks so important that the Political Committee of the Hungarian Workers' Party (HWP) was willing to give significant concessions: to cede a Danube section, closing the Hungarian Consulate in Bratislava and even giving up Hungarian book publishing and book trade in Prague.⁶ Negotia-

⁴ The report of the Hungarian Embassy in Prague to the Hungarian Foreign Ministry, 12th July 1953. Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár Országos Levéltára (hereinafter referred to only as MNL OL), Foreign Ministry documents (KÜL), TŰK Czechoslovakia XIX-J-1-j 21.box. 206/1953.

⁵ Ladislav Novomeský was already arrested 1951. He was released in 1956 and was rehabilitated in 1963.

⁶ Minutes of the meeting of the Political Committee of the HWP of 18th November

tions about a power station on the Danube and economic help started between the two governments in November 1955. It turned up here that the Hungarian government could give a part of the Danube to Czechoslovakia in order to economise the construction works. Hungary asked only for free transport and the right of fishing in return.

In early 1956, Hungary, in accordance with the talks that started earlier, turned to Czechoslovakia for economic help. They asked for 10 million dollars in gold or cash for a two-year term. They also asked Czechoslovakia to continue the export of 65 MWh electric energy, fixed in the aluminium treaty of 1951, for the year of 1956. The Hungarians wanted the imported electrical energy from the German Democratic Republic and Poland to be transported through Czechoslovakia.⁷ Hungary ordered T-34 tanks from the Skoda Works but they did not want them to be delivered due to the economic difficulties and they asked for the cooperation of the Czechoslovak government.⁸ The discussion of these questions took place in Prague on 3rd–4th February 1956 with the participation of Rákosi, Novotný and Prime Minister Široký. During the talks, Novotný said that Czechoslovak economy was working well, they had produced enormous growth in industrial production during the previous years, they had remained within the planned wage limits and productivity also increased. The Czechoslovaks explained that they understood the difficult situation of Hungary as other socialist countries had asked for their help as well. Široký resented the Hungarians' withdrawal from the purchase of the tanks; he said that the tanks were being manufactured and to stop the production would cause problems. Finally they agreed in the following points: Czechoslovakia grants 10 million Swiss francs to Hungary for two years at the interest of 2 %, and 5 million Swiss francs for one year at the same interest. They also offered credit to Hungary for the purchase of machines in order to facilitate Hungarian agricultural production. They promised the Hungarians 55 MWh instead of 65 MWh for 1956. The participants also agreed that the Ministers of Foreign Trade of the two countries would meet in the near future in order to

1955. MNL-OL, MK-S f. 276, 53. cs., 257. ő.e.

⁷ Minutes of the meeting of the Political Committee of the HWP of 1st February 1956. Ibidem, 268. ő.e.

⁸ Minutes of the meeting of the Political Committee of the HWP of 6th February 1956. Ibidem, 269. ő.e.

discuss the possibilities to take joint steps for appearance on the capitalist market. The Hungarian proposal for the power station on the Danube was approved and the Hungarian book trade in Prague continued. Both parties pointed out that cooperation between the two countries and their parties must be made even more intense.⁹

The Hungarian Question in Czechoslovakia in 1945–1955

The Hungarian revolution of 1956 found the Hungarian minority in Czechoslovakia in a completely uncertain legal situation. After the sufferings and disappointment during the Second World War and during the years of being outlawed, the Hungarians were incapable of any significant resistance against the totalitarian party system. They could see the events of the Hungarian revolution from a specific point of view due to the trauma of the population exchange. Let us take a little detour to understand this situation clearly.

President Edvard Beneš proclaimed his government programme, which emphasised the collective responsibility of the minorities, in Košice on 5th April 1945. This deprived most Hungarians of any legal protection and placed them into a homeless situation. The Czechoslovak authorities began harassing the Hungarians and they also started intense diplomatic activity to gain the support of the western powers for the evacuation of the Hungarian population. One of the most important elements in the implementation of the Košice Programme was the presidential decree No. 33 issued on 2nd August 1945, which deprived the overwhelming majority of Hungarians of Czechoslovak citizenship. This decree legalized the former discriminative arrangements, which completely outlawed the Hungarians economically, socially, politically and culturally. At the Potsdam Conference (July–August 1945), the great powers did not give their consent to the relocation of the Hungarian population. Despite this, discriminating measures were taken again and again. Beneš and his circle soon realised that they could not convince the great powers about the necessity of the evacuation of the Hungarians merely on the basis of the future security of Czechoslovakia and the plan of the creation of a nation state. Therefore, they emphasised and exaggerated the fundamentally false notion that the Hungarian and German national minorities were re-

⁹ Ibidem.

sponsible for the dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1938–1939. They labelled all Hungarians chauvinist and irredentist at the Paris peace talks as well.¹⁰

The treaty of population exchange between Czechoslovakia and Hungary, signed on 27th February 1946, did not settle problems between the two countries because it said that so many Hungarians could be transported to Hungary as many Slovaks and Czechs signed up for moving to Czechoslovakia. Beneš and the Czechoslovak leadership continued their attacks against the Hungarian minority. They wanted to eliminate the continuous Hungarian population along the border by all means, and when they saw that they could not count on foreign support, they started reslovakization. This assimilation campaign was launched by the decree of the Slovak commissioner of foreign affairs of 17th July 1946. The Hungarians were offered a choice: if they declare themselves Slovak, they will get back their citizenship, otherwise they will have to leave Czechoslovakia. As a result, over 400 thousand Hungarians declared themselves Slovak. Also as a part of the assimilation campaign, masses of Hungarians were deported to the Sudetenland referring to the compulsory public labour act. These people had to go with their whole families; their homes were allocated to Slovak Communist families from Northern territories.

The Allied Powers signed the peace treaty with Czechoslovakia and Hungary in Paris on 10th February 1947. The Hungarian Government resented that no assurance of the protection of human rights was guaranteed for Hungarian national minorities beyond the borders, primarily in Czechoslovakia. On 12 April 1947, the evacuation of Hungarians from and the voluntary movement of Slovaks from Hungary to Czechoslovakia set off. The Hungarian party leadership agreed to continue the population exchange at the party summit (CCP and HWP) in Budapest on 23rd–25th February 1948. They promised not to initiate talks on the Hungarian minority in Slovakia until the Czechoslovakian elections in May. In return, the Czechoslovaks promised not to worsen the case of the Hungarians in Czechoslovakia. This did not change, however, the uncertain situation of the Hungarian minority. On 18th April 1948, Budapest protested against the deterio-

¹⁰ E. BENEŠ, *Šest let exilu a druhé světové války: řeči, projevy a dokumenty z roku 1938–45*, Praha 1946, p 232.

rating situation in a memorandum and they even mentioned stopping the population exchange if the situation does not improve. Mátyás Rákosi called the CCP leaders to account for failing to keep the points of their former agreement. In 1948, after the Communist takeover of Klement Gottwald and the troubles during the Beneš years, the Communist Party promised that the Hungarian minority could remain in his native land and their citizenship would be restored in the spirit of Marxism-Leninism and proletarian internationalism. On 25th October 1948, the Czechoslovak National Assembly passed Act 245/1948, which enabled Hungarians to regain Czechoslovak citizenship with certain limitations on condition that they took an oath of loyalty within 90 days. Those who left Czechoslovakia due to the population exchange agreement and those who committed crime against the state, could not regain their citizenship.

The population exchange ended on 22nd December 1948¹¹ although a few people arrived in Hungary as late as spring 1949. Approximately 100,000 Hungarians were expatriated officially, while the population of Czechoslovakia increased with 73,000 Slovaks from Hungary. On 21st July 1949, a joint Czechoslovak-Hungarian committee formally declared it completed. On 25th July 1949, the two states made the agreement of Štrbské Pleso, which settled the economic and financial questions that arose in connection with the population exchange.

The Hungarian nationality question still remained a problem for Czechoslovakia. After the Communist takeovers of 1948–1949 in East-Central Europe, Moscow, bearing in mind the interests of the “Pax Sovietica”, stopped the growing nationalist conflicts in the region with the word of power. For the following forty years, the doctrine of proletarian internationalism determined the policy of the Communist party-state towards nationalism. Czechoslovakia was no exception from this rule. The evolving Cold War atmosphere forged the countries of the Soviet Bloc together, and also the Czechoslovak-Hungarian relations improved. The first sign of the approach was the signature of the Czechoslovak-Hungarian treaty of friendship, cooperation and mutual assistance on 23rd June 1949. This helped to improve the situation of the Hungarian minority. In March 1949 the Cultural Asso-

¹¹ For a summary of it see V. KATALIN, *A kiteleptéستől a reszlovakizációig*, Pozsony 2001; A. POPÉLY, *Fél évszázad kisebbségben*, Somorja 2014, pp. 13–101.

ciation of Hungarian Workers in Czechoslovakia (Csemadok) was established. Already in December 1948, the "*Új Szó*" (Hungarian Word) a Hungarian Communist paper was given permission to appear. The Hungarian minority gradually regained citizenship during 1949. A five-member Hungarian Committee worked next to the Central Committee of the Slovakian Communist Party in 1949–1951. This committee controlled the execution of the party decisions in connection with the Hungarian minority. The CCP and within it the SCP allowed Hungarians to join their ranks. The Hungarian institutions were presented in the Czechoslovak press as the achievement of the Communist political system for which the Hungarians should be grateful. The secret party decisions of the CCP between 1948 and 1952 on the emancipation of the Hungarians, tried to eliminate of the consequences of the outlawed situation, make the Hungarian settlements in South Slovakia bilingual and gradually industrialise the agrarian regions. However, new ideas met with limitations and they remained mere plans. In the first period of the existence of the Csemadok, 1949–1956, it functioned as a little party in Czechoslovakia; no economic or political task could be carried out without its support. It became one of the most influential organisations in the Hungarian villages. Its cultural characteristic was only visible locally; at the national level, it functioned as a political organisation. The Csemadok became target of Slovak nationalism. In 1953, it was criticised for playing "*János vitéz*", a Hungarian folk-tale-like play, too often. The red-white-green tricolor was waved in it and one of the songs in the play said: "*This flag is all that ours, we shall never abandon it.*"¹² The Hungarians were crying aloud and were applauding loudly at the end of the performances. The Slovak authorities regarded this as the advance of Hungarian bourgeois nationalism.

The new constitution of 1949 spoke about the nation of Czechs and Slovaks only; it failed to mention other nationalities in the country. The policy of the CCP regarding nationalities was not driven by the wish to redress the injustices of the past. They wanted to use the Hungarians, economically and morally destroyed with the Košice Programme and the Beneš decrees, for the acceleration of the construc-

¹² The report of the Hungarian High Consulate in Bratislava to the Hungarian Foreign Ministry on 6th August 1954. MNL OL, KÜM, TŰK Czechoslovakia XIX-J-1-j 16/b 54. d. 6/5/1954.

tion of Socialism. The arrangement whose objective was the complete emancipation of the Hungarian minority in economy and culture came into effect on 1st July 1952. It also declared the principle of bilingualism. Complete equality before law did not come true, however. The reslovakized, for example, were not regarded as Hungarian; the authorities thought that they had to be educated in Slovak spirit. The principle of bilingualism also failed to be accomplished as the relevant party decision remained secret.

Hungarian-language primary and secondary schools were allowed to work again in 1949–1950. Old Hungarian Communists with experience in public affairs were rehabilitated, and young cadres were placed to leading positions. These steps improved the situation of the Hungarian minority although their disadvantageous position and the intrusion of the state in their lives did not come to an end. They were not quite familiar with their legal possibilities; what laws they could refer to. On 6th January 1950, the Presidency of the Central Committee of the SCP accepted a resolution of several points, which contained the plan of the real emancipation of the Hungarian minority. This resolution ensured restitution for those who returned from the Czech territory as well, it said that Hungarian members must be added to national committees, official declarations must be published in two languages and that the continuous supply of Hungarian teachers must be organised. New schools opened and new papers were published; on the other hand, some very important cultural institutions were closed down. The Czechoslovak party leadership played an instrumental role in this. Among the liquidated institutions were the Hungarian Fold Ensemble in 1955 and the Hungarian book publishing company in early 1956. These steps outraged the Hungarian intellectuals. Since both the ensemble and the book publisher were closed down due to financial reasons, several factories with Hungarian majority offered unpaid work to keep these institutions but their offer was not approved of by the authorities.¹³

In the summer of 1956, a new constitutional law was made to calm down the minorities. It said that cultural facilities must be provided for Hungarian and Ukrainian nationalities. Cultural exchange became

¹³ The report of the Hungarian Embassy in Prague to the Hungarian Foreign Ministry on 3rd May. MNL OL, KÜM TŰK Czechoslovakia XIX-J-1-j 55. d. 215/1955. 005635/1955.

invigorated between Czechoslovakia and Hungary; travelling was made easier from one country to the other. Although visa requirement was not abolished, crossing the border was now less complicated from summer 1956. At the time of the outbreak of the revolution, 2,000–5,000 Hungarian citizens were in Czechoslovakia and about just as many Czechoslovak citizens in Hungary.¹⁴ The Hungarian Consulate in Bratislava asked the Foreign Ministry to abolish the visa requirement as visas had no controlling, limiting or any other effect; they merely show statistics about the travellers. In their view, such a step would have a political message, and it could improve the relationship between the two countries, since the majority of the travellers were ethnic Hungarians from Czechoslovakia.¹⁵ The abolishment of the visa requirement was eventually postponed due to the revolution of 1956.

Czechoslovakia in 1956

Political ferment started in Czechoslovakia in the wake of the 20th congress of the Soviet Communist Party. Khrushchev's sever-hour speech emphasised, among other ideas, the peaceful possibility of the revolution. The event that elicited the loudest response was the criticism of Stalin's policy. The hope arose in the citizens of Czechoslovakia: once self-cleaning has started within the party, perhaps they will be able to live a more dignified life without oppression and terror. After the Moscow congress, the Czechoslovak Communist Party became invigorated: party members and outsiders now dared to speak and criticise. Some even re-evaluated the role of Stalin, which would have been impossible earlier. The Communist leadership received a lot of criticism within the party; especially the violence of socialist constitutionalism and the slow pace of rehabilitation were resented. In March 1956, the Central Committee of the CCP decided to channel the debate on the cult of personality between strong limits, and therefore the press was more seriously censored than before. They wanted to consolidate the domestic social tensions with partial economic reforms. Pay-rise was implemented in several state sectors,

¹⁴ The report of Consul General, József Bényi to the Hungarian Foreign Ministry, 18th January 1957. MNL OL, KÜM TŰK Czechoslovakia XIX-J-1-j 4/j. 14. d.

¹⁵ The report of Consul General, József Bényi to the Hungarian Foreign Ministry, 27th July 1956. MNL OL, KÜM TŰK Czechoslovakia XIX-J-32-a 8. d. 4/8/1956.

weekly working hours were shortened, and the prices of a few consumer goods were reduced. In 1956, there were students' protests in Czechoslovakia. Intellectuals occasionally asked inconvenient questions. Especially writers were thought to be dangerous but the political leadership managed to silence them.

The Czechoslovak Communist Youth Organisation organised May feasts in Prague and other cities for 20th May 1956, which were at first banned but later allowed by the party leadership. In the days before the feast days student associations sent letters to factory workers. They wrote that students in Czechoslovakia were fighting for liberty, democracy and changes, and they ask the workers for help. They gathered their demands into 12 points, which focused on the liberalisation of university education; they demanded "*more vacation, less Marxism*".¹⁶ They organised a demonstration in the centre of Prague but the State Security Service, on seeing banners against the government, responded immediately. When the demonstrating youth would not give in, police used violence. The two leaders of the student association had already been arrested before 20th May. The others were cited to the police station where they were told that unless they changed their behaviour, they would have to bear the consequences. However, Marxism was decreased from 40–50 to 30 lectures in the curriculum and other measures were designed to alleviate the situation. They did all they could in order to prevent students from arguing. As punishment and to prevent any disorder, students were no more sent to significant political events.

The party group of the Czechoslovakian writers' association demanded the abolishment of censorship in the summer of 1956. They also accused the party leadership of weakness and not daring to reveal news of the debates in Poland and Hungary. Writers had been criticising the regime in the press continuously since 1955, and therefore the leadership had an eye on them. Censorship had to prevent the publication of any article with an anti-party tone. The Czechoslovak public showed great interest in Hungarian papers in 1956. In order to avoid the spread of any unwanted ideas, some Hungarian newspapers were banned in Czechoslovakia. *Irodalmi Újság* (Literary Gazette)

¹⁶ The report of the Hungarian ambassador in Prague to the Hungarian Foreign Ministry, 31st May 1956. MNL OL, KÜM TÜK Czechoslovakia XIX-J-1-j 21. d. 116/2/1956.

and *Ludas Matyi* (Matthias the Gooseboy – a satirical magazine) were considered to be the most dangerous ones, so their official shipping and selling was stopped.¹⁷ The Minister of the Interior had to personally supervise the monitoring and permission of newspapers. In early October 1956, news about the re-burial of László Rajk aroused keen interest in Czechoslovakia. The Polish events and Władisław Gomułka's speeches were roundly condemned by the Czechoslovak administration.¹⁸ At the meeting of Slovak party leaders of 18th October, with the participation of the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the CCP, Antonín Novotný, the First Secretary of the SCP, Karol Bacílek pointed out that while official information from Prague failed to give a clear picture of the events in Hungary, the Hungarian press was having a great impact not only on the Hungarians but also on the non-Hungarian speaking Slovak population. Novotný warned the Slovak leaders that if they fail to take firm steps, a situation similar to that in Poland and Hungary could develop in Slovakia as well. They also decided to put the central newspaper of the Hungarian Communist Party *Szabad Nép* (Free People) on the list of suspicious press items. Czechoslovak censorship had to monitor Hungarian papers continuously and prevent the circulation of suspicious ones.

Upon receiving news about the events of 23rd October in Budapest the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Communist Party came together immediately and they made several decisions. They declared that a counter-revolution was going on in Hungary and the party leaders and national committee leaders in districts are to be informed about it (they were informed on 24th October). The first military arrangements on 24th and 25th October remained in effect until the end of 1956. The Czechoslovak army was put on alert. All Hungarian newspapers were forbidden to bring to the country.¹⁹ According to the minutes of the Political Committee meeting of 24th October 1956 the Czechoslovak leadership did not accept an official viewpoint about the policy of Imre Nagy. The leaders of the Czechoslovak Communist

¹⁷ D. ČIERNA-LANTAYOVÁ, Die Ereignisse von 1956 und die slowakische Gesellschaft, in: H. H. HAHN – H. OLSCHOWSKY (eds.), *Das Jahr 1956 in Ostmitteleuropa*, Berlin 1996, p. 84.

¹⁸ KAPLAN, p. 56.

¹⁹ J. MARUŠIAK, Slovakia and the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, in: A. ZUB – S. FLAVIUS (eds.), *Sovietization in Romania and Czechoslovakia*, Iași – Bucharest 2003, p. 97.

Party did not know at this point if Khrushchev or Molotov was to win the struggle for power after the 20th congress of the Soviet Communist Party in Moscow. The Hungarian events were far better understood in Prague and Bratislava than in other Socialist countries; they immediately cancelled the visit of the government delegation to China, which had been organised months before, knowing that making decisions from the distance was difficult. On 24th October, Antonín Novotný attended the emergency meeting of the Presidency of the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party, which focused on the events in Poland and Hungary. There, “*having been convinced about the gravity of the situation*”, he found the intervention of the Soviet military forces in Budapest justified. He met with Nikita Khrushchev as well as other Communist leaders from various countries, and he returned to Prague on the same day. There he said that Khrushchev had harshly criticised the Hungarian leaders for their passivity. He characterised the Hungarian events as counterrevolutionary takeover and he called the revolutionaries “bandits”.²⁰ The Czechoslovak party leadership was afraid that if the movement was to extend to Slovakia, then the rebellious territory which wanted to break away from the Soviet Union would form one huge unit from the Adriatic to the Baltic Sea.²¹ They introduced a number of regulations in order to prevent this. Slovakia was closed for tourism during the Hungarian revolution lest Western agents and other unwanted figures could become active. On 24th October, suspicious people were immediately arrested in Bratislava and other towns along the border where unrest could be felt. It was enough to call the Hungarian events “freedom fight” to get arrested. Slovak nationalism became visible soon, too: Hungarian speakers were targets of harassment in streets and offensive remarks at workplaces. A group of 35 researchers from the Hungarian Academy of Sciences reported that the host Slovak factory told them to prepare for possible internship in the near future.²² Rudolf Strechaj, the president of the Body of Slo-

²⁰ J. BÍLEK – V. PILÁT, Bezprostřední reakce československých politických a vojenských orgánů na povstání v Maďarsku, in: *Soudobé dějiny*, 4, 1996, p. 500.

²¹ K. KAPLAN, Csehszlovákia 1956-ban, in: C. BÉKÉS (ed.), *Az 1956-os magyar forradalom helye a szovjet kommunista rendszer összeomlásában. Az 1991. július 13–15-én Budapesten, az Országos Széchényi Könyvtárban megtartott nemzetközi konferencia jegyzőkönyve*, Budapest 1993, p. 91.

²² 16th January 1957. MNL OL, KÜM TÜK Czechoslovakia XIX-J-1-4/j, 14. d. 12/1957.

vakian Commissars, which functioned as an interim government, held a meeting with the leaders of civil organisations on 25th October 1956. The main question there was how to stop the spread of the Hungarian revolution. Károly Pathó, the first secretary of Csemadok suggested granting more rights to the nationalities and keeping the laws of 1952 which concerned the nationalities. This elicited great outrage;²³ he was called impertinent, and he was accused of turning the Hungarian events to the advantage of the Hungarian minority in Czechoslovakia. The Czechoslovak Communist Party was united in the judgement of the Hungarian revolution from the very beginning. Local authorities in Slovakia were authorized to take steps in order to have an influence on the public opinion beyond the borders and to give assistance to the party leaders in the counties. The Czechoslovak leaders were afraid that the political, national and social problems could lead to unrest in the whole country but especially in Slovakia, and that such movements could escalate into an uprising against the regime. This was not completely unrealistic at the beginning. One of the diplomats at the Hungarian consulate in Bratislava wrote these words: *"The events that took place in the first days were received well by the Slovaks. Later however this gave way to a growing dislike [...] due to the Slovak press, which wrote about Hungarian territorial claims and irredentist voices."*²⁴

Guards at public offices were strengthened and double police patrols were given submachine guns. Magazines and party buildings were guarded especially strongly. They also took care not to call attention. The most intense alert was ordered along the Hungarian border. The question of the Hungarian minority was made even more problematic by the fact that the Slovak question itself was unsettled. Police spies reported that the Czech population was afraid that the Slovaks would use the international crisis to break away from Czechoslovakia. Authorities were afraid of the movements of the Slovaks. *"Party members regularly checked churches, sports events and every place where people gathered in great numbers."*²⁵ The tension between Czechs and Slovaks

²³ K. PATHÓ, Miért csökkent 1956-ban a Csemadok taglétszáma?, in: *Vasárnap*, May 5, 1995.

²⁴ The report of József Bényi deputy consul from Prague to the Hungarian Foreign Ministry of 21st December 1956. MNL OL, KÜM TÜK Czechoslovakia XIX-J-1 4/j, 14. d. 00277/1957.

²⁵ The report of the Hungarian ambassador, József Gábor, to the Hungarian Foreign

was manifested at the highest party level as well. In 1956, the extension of the rights of the central Slovakian institutions came into question, but the idea of a federal system or autonomy were regarded as nationalist and anti-state behaviour.

It was the sign of the distrust towards the Slovakian leadership that the hard-line Stalinist Bruno Köhler was sent to Bratislava in order to supervise the propaganda campaign against the Hungarian uprising, and to keep an eye on the Slovak comrades. Slovaks felt that the Czechs deceived them in 1945 again and they did not receive enough authority to administer their own affairs. The rivalry between the government officials in Prague and Bratislava deepened the tension between the Czech and Slovak people. The Slovaks wanted more independence from Prague, but they were also anxious about the Hungarian minority in their smaller homeland. They did not want to share Slovakia with them; it would have been interpreted as giving up some of their national sovereignty. Their fears seemed justified when rumour spread that the Hungarians wanted to regain Southern Slovakia.²⁶ The party centre in Budapest also received news from its embassy that “national Communism” appeared in Slovakia. The events in Hungary temporarily stopped the activity against the Slovak intellectual opposition. For the Czechoslovak leadership, the demonstration of unity was the most important task at that point. The propaganda machinery set in motion as well: they propagated that what was happening in Hungary was the work of the Hungarian reactionary movement, and that the Hungarian lords wanted to put their hands on Slovakia. They spoke about the Hungarian revolt as a nationalist, chauvinistic movement, which was threatening the territorial integrity of Czechoslovakia. They even plugged that the Hungarians wanted to annex Slovakia and the country would function like the Austro-Hungarian Empire.²⁷ Many did not see the unreality of this presumption, and therefore no wonder that the majority of the Slovaks, after their initial sympathy, turned away from the Hungarian revolution and looked forward to the victory of the Soviet troops. A minority, mostly farmers, welcomed the Hungarian revolution; they

Ministry of 30th January 1957. MNL OL, KÜM TÜK Czechoslovakia, XIX-J-1-j 4/j, 14. d. 00708/1957.

²⁶ M. BLAIRE, *Promarněná příležitost. Československo a rok 1956*, Praha 2001, p. 300.

²⁷ Ibidem.

were hoping that after the victory of the revolution, cooperative farms would be dissolved and they would get back their land. The third part of the Slovak population was hovering between supporting and rejecting the Hungarian revolution. They were unable to decide what would be favourable for them but after the Soviet occupation they welcomed the crushing of the revolution.

On 26th October 1956, the Czechoslovak leadership offered to the leaders of the Soviet Communist Party to set up volunteer units and despatch them in Hungary.²⁸ Czechoslovak Prime Minister Široký was planning a visit to Hungary as early as 26th October in order to clarify the situation and give direct assistance, but the government of Imre Nagy postponed the meeting to early November, hoping that order would have been reinstated by then.

On 26th October 1956, the Political Committee of the Czechoslovak Communist Party decided to put the army and the police on alert. On 28th October the armed units and the militia received order to be on full alert (Lidové Milice – similar to the “Munkásőrség” or Workers’ Guard in Hungary after the revolution). In order to avoid unrest, the Czechoslovak leadership made a decision to order newspaper editors “to follow the correct line” regarding Hungary and Poland.²⁹ They did not know what reaction to expect from the Hungarians in Slovakia. Border guards were strengthened and the due discharge of soldiers who completed their service was postponed for an uncertain date. The fact that mostly Czech and Slovak reserves were called in for service shows the utter distrust of the authorities towards the Hungarians. The conscription of Poles was also avoided. Hungarian soldiers were put to the Czecho-Moravian border area or they were sent home.³⁰ The troops ordered to defend the Slovak-Hungarian border had occupied their positions only by 31st October. The strategic goal for the army high-command was to defend the bridgehead at Bratislava in case of a possible attack. Police received a special action plan by 28th October: the celebration day of the 38th anniversary of the formation of Czechoslovakia. The Communist opposition in Czechoslovakia was inspired by the Polish and Hungarian events. On 27th October, the

²⁸ BÍLEK – PILÁT, p. 501.

²⁹ Said at the 146th meeting of the Political Committee of the Central Committee of the CCP on 26th October 1956. MNL OL, XXXII-16 Czechoslovakia 11. d.

³⁰ MARUŠIAK, p. 100.

authorities caught a group which was trying to start a protest by chanting anti-government slogans in the crowd on Wenceslas Square.³¹ The first serious incident took place on that day: a group of eight occupied a magazine near Jičín. Thanks to the quick action of the local authorities, they were disarmed immediately. This elicited great fear in the Communist leadership; they worked out a plan for the defence of public buildings in Prague on the night of 27th–28th October. They sent tanks to important junctions.³² At the meeting of the general staff on 29th October it turned up that counter-revolutionary forces from Hungary might want to cross the border and spread the uprising in Slovakia. It seemed also possible that the Hungarian rebels would be pushed to Czech territories. In order to prevent this, the general staff decided to call reserves to service but they did not move troops from the western part of the country as *“this could be interpreted as if they were mobilising against Hungary”*.³³ On the night of 31st October, four students, aged 16–18, wrote this text on posters: *“Students! [...] we do not want Socialism but democracy. We support the freedom fight of the Hungarian people. With the United States of America forever! Death on the Soviet Union! Away with Communists; we want freedom!”*³⁴ Later they were sentenced for agitation against the regime. Political officers started the preparation of the army as well. As a Slovakian-Hungarian soldier who served there as a parachutist remembers that they were instructed on 24th October: *“The Hungarians in Hungary have revolted against the Slavs, against Communism and the Soviet Union.”*³⁵ The local political officer had him and his fellow soldiers sign a proclamation in the military base at Töketerebes on 25th October which said: *“We*

³¹ 5th October 1956. Národní archiv, Praha (hereinafter NA), AÚV KSČ, fond 02/2-Politické byro ÚV KSČ 120, a. j. 149.

³² J. MADRY, Reflexe maďarského povstání v jednáních ústředních politických orgánů Československa, in: *Vojenská opatření Československa v souvislosti s maďarským povstáním 1956: Vědecké kolokvium s mezinárodní účastí, konané ve dnech 22.–23. září 1993 v Historickém ústavu Armády České republiky v Praze*, Praha 1994, p. 30.

³³ Note from the special meeting of the College of the National Defence Ministry on 29th October 1956. Vojenský historický archiv, Praha (hereinafter VHA), fond MNO, 1956 SM/KM, 1/10–2.

³⁴ 28th December 1956. NA Praha, AÚV KSČ, fond 02/2-Politické byro ÚV KSČ 162, a. j. 126.

³⁵ Z. BALASSA, Csehszlovákiai emléktöredékek 1956-ból, in: *Erdélyi Magyarság*, 1996, Oktober 28, p. 26.

*demand to be dispatched as volunteers against the Hungarians. We promise to keep our vow and exterminate the Hungarians in the name of the Slavs!"*³⁶ (The parachutist denied the signature of this, and therefore he was dismissed two weeks later.)

The armed forces and the party apparatus were on alert so that if the waves of the Hungarian events should splash into Czechoslovakia, they could choke them immediately. On the encouragement of the party organisations, 7,000 protesting telegram arrived at the CCP and the government; they condemned the Hungarian counter-revolution but they expressed their sympathy towards the Hungarian people. The CCP wrote a letter to the Central Committee of the HWP on 29th October, in which they assured the Hungarian party administration of their sympathy and astonishment. *"All this deeply touches our people, who can see a friendly fraternal country in the People's Republic of Hungary, which is linked to us with the common ideas of Socialism and peace."*³⁷ The Czechoslovak administration expressed its hope that the clashes would end and the construction of Socialism could continue in Hungary. The Czechoslovak government assured the Hungarian people of its support in economic development and raising the living standard. They sent their wish to the Hungarian working class through the government: *"Our path is lighted with the great teaching of Marxism-Leninism. Being filled with the deep emotions of proletarian internationalism we wish the Hungarian Workers' Party to lead the Hungarian people to prosperity, to the flourishing of the country, to the victory of Socialism."*³⁸ The Hungarian ambassador to Prague had talks with Prime Minister Široký on 2nd November. The latter already doubted the loyalty of Imre Nagy to the party and his dedication to the construction of Socialism in the future.³⁹ On the same day, Novotný and Široký participated at the Bucharest meeting, where Khrushchev and Malenkov informed the Romanian and Czechoslovak administration about the Soviet military intervention. The Czechoslovak leaders offered joint military offensive for the second time, only to be rejected

³⁶ Ibidem.

³⁷ Sent by the Central Committee of the CCP to the Central Committee of the HWP on 29th October 1956. MNL OL, Czechoslovakia XXXII-16 11 d.

³⁸ Ibidem.

³⁹ 30th January 1957. MNL OL, KÜM TÜK Czechoslovakia XIX-J-1-j 4/j, 14. d. 33/1957.

again.⁴⁰ Novotný informed the Political Committee about the content of the meeting, the second invasion of Hungary, on the same day. They decided that President Zápotocký would send a radio message to the public about this event on 3rd November. The Czechoslovak Army did not participate in the intervention but there are sources which say that some units were deployed under Soviet flag around Komárom.⁴¹ The events in Hungary gave an opportunity for the Czechoslovak administration to consolidate its position in the country. For those, crushing the Hungarian revolution gave justification for their own former policy, and they thought they were correct in the evaluation of the objectives decided on the 20th congress. On 20th November 1956, the Foreign Minister abolished those military regulations that were in effect in Czechoslovakia since 24th October.⁴² The Hungarian population in Slovakia was surprised by the news of the revolution.⁴³ As an eyewitness put it: “[M]orally collapsed, lacerated in spirit, waiting for a Liberator Moses, the news of the Hungarian revolution struck the distressed Hungarians like lightning from a clear sky.”⁴⁴ After the first successes, they began to hope that the revolutionary ideas would spread in Czechoslovakia as well. They expected the democratisation of the regime, and therefore they regarded the Hungarian revolution as their own case. “Well, at least the Hungarians teach the Russians once [...] Imre Nagy was spoken about like Petőfi and Kossuth; people put their trust in him. [...] People were enthusiastic in secret, women were praying in secret for the success of the revolution – a memoir says – every Hungarian honestly believed that if the Bolshevik gendarmes leave, the Czechoslovak political life would return to a more humane democracy, similar, at least, to that of the republic between the two world wars.”⁴⁵ Hungarians in Czechoslovakia were so strongly intimidated that they did not think of any mass movements during

⁴⁰ KAPLAN, p. 56.

⁴¹ BALASSA, p. 26. The deployment of the Czechoslovak Army has not been proved with archive documents.

⁴² J. PERNES, Ohlas maďarské revoluce roku 1956 v československé veřejnosti, in: *Soudobé dějiny*, 4, 1996, p. 525.

⁴³ A. SIMON, A szlovákiai magyarok és az 1956-os forradalom, in: E. IVANIČKOVÁ – A. SIMON (eds.), *Az 1956-os Magyar Forradalom és Szlovákia*, Somorja – Pozsony 2006, pp. 41–42.

⁴⁴ M. KMECZKÓ, Hogyan élték meg 1956-ot a csehszlovákiai magyarok? Visszaemlékezések színes csokra, in: *Dimenziók*, 1, 1994, p. 11.

⁴⁵ Ibidem.

the days of the revolution. They could express their support only figuratively and only in secret. Some tried to get to Hungary illegally in order to give help to the rebels. On 30th October 1956, twenty-seven people tried to cross the borders at Csákányháza, near Lučenec. Seven of them were shot dead or captured.⁴⁶ In Dunaszerdahely, the authorities prevented the strike of the local Hungarians.⁴⁷ On 24th October, the meeting of the Central Committee decided to send agents to students' gatherings in order to prevent the "ideological dissent" from spreading any further. Students of the Faculty of Mining in Košice remembered their dead fellows in Hungary with a one-minute silence in spite of the strict spying activity. Students of the local Hungarian secondary school in Lučenec wore a black ribbon. The administration ordered district and sub-district party organisations to cooperate with the security forces and prevent any counter-revolutionary action. Csemadok was put under supervision and its leaders were given instructions how to think about the Hungarian events. The Central Committee of the Csemadok held a meeting on 26th October 1956. They were cautious enough not to take minutes of the meeting lest it could be used against them later. They condemned the Hungarian uprising on 29th October, and they called members to participate at the events of the Soviet-Czechoslovak friendship month.⁴⁸ Members considered the Csemadok declaration an open betrayal and about 9–10 %, about 2,000 people left the organisation immediately. At the meeting of the Slovak National Front on 24th July 1957, the president of Csemadok, Gyula Lőrincz said: *"1957 is not 1938 [...] the absolute majority of the Hungarian workers in Czechoslovakia stood firm in the critical October days, and they proved that they loved their country the Republic of Czechoslovakia, that they are good patriots. However, it would be a mistake not to see the other side of the coin: that there are outcasts, who were hiding so far, who have gained courage during the Hungarian revolution and attempted to create trouble, in vain, among the Hungarian workers in Czechoslovakia."*⁴⁹ The text served as justification: there was no reason for the collective punishment of the Hungarians as it had happened in 1945. The

⁴⁶ A. SZESZTAY, *Nemzetiségi kérdés a Kárpát-medencében 1956–62*, Budapest 2003, p. 39.

⁴⁷ T. HAJDU, A magyar reakció népellenes puccsa. A Csehszlovák KB 1956. december 5-6-i ülése a magyarországi eseményekről, in: *Évkönyv II.* 1993, Budapest 1993, p. 130.

⁴⁸ *Új Szó*, 30th October 1956, p. 4.

⁴⁹ *Hét*, 7th July 1957.

publication of the news in the national newspapers showed that the Hungarians in Slovakia could not be identified with the revolution. Articles and comments in the Czechoslovak press about the Hungarians truly showed the attempts of the government for the consolidation of its domestic and foreign policy. The Czechoslovak Government and the party leaders agreed with the Soviet military invasion in Hungary and they gave all they could to support it. Measures of the Nagy government were highlighted or not mentioned – in accordance with the momentary interest. On 24th October, the Hungarian events were not yet mentioned because First Secretary Novotný had earlier warned the press to be cautious and ordered it to avoid the evaluation of the events in Budapest and Warsaw.⁵⁰ On the other hand, *Rudé právo* published an editorial to draw the attention of all the workers in the country to the importance of unity; it spoke about the indissoluble unity of Czechoslovak-Soviet friendship and emphasised: “*We have to bear in mind our own situation, our own questions and problems rather than those of others.*” In the first days of fighting, they called the events “acts of white terror” and they supported their arguments with articles from Soviet newspapers. The editorial of *Rudé právo* on 25th October called the reader for further caution and they labelled the Hungarian events counter-revolution. 25th October marked a clear change in terminology: they called the Hungarian rebels inhumane beastly enemies, who had been preparing in secret and now took the opportunity and attacked the Hungarian people.⁵¹ On the other hand, articles expressed solidarity with the “Hungarian working people” from the beginning.

Új Szó, the only Hungarian-language newspaper in Czechoslovakia at that time, first reported the Budapest events of 23rd October on 25th October. Typical of party propaganda, the article published the party opinion before reporting the events themselves. They tried to convey the message that everything was in order in Czechoslovakia and there was no reason for movements similar to those in Hungary. What actually happened in Budapest appeared in the foreign policy section of the paper, under the title “Serious events in Hungary”, which further decreased its significance. In their opinion, counter-revolutionary groups were successfully eliminated. They tried to convince readers

⁵⁰ HAJDU, p. 125.

⁵¹ *Rudé právo*, 25th October 1956.

that all resistance had stopped. On 26th October, they published another article with the title "With determination and certainty", which emphasised the necessity of loyalty to and friendship with the Soviet Union. *Új Ifjúság* (New Youth), the weekly of the Central Committee of the Socialist Youth Association in Slovakia, published two articles with rebellious tone that had got through censorship on 27th October. They called for solidarity with Hungary on the last page, in the sport section, thoroughly paraphrased, and they recommended following programmes in the Hungarian radio and on Austrian television. The other article demanded Slovakian Hungarian writers to write the slander of the Hungarian population in Czechoslovakia after WWII. Several journalists were dismissed later due to these articles. On 27th October, *Új Szó* published articles underlining the unity of Slovak and Hungarian workers and their loyalty to the party. The paper adopted the viewpoint of the party group of the writers' association: the principles of proletarian internationalism must determine the relationship with Poland and Hungary. From 28th October, all caution in the tone was dropped: what happened in Hungary was not a local rebellion and determined steps were required.

For a few days from 28th October 1956, *Új Szó* was published in two editions: one for the Czechoslovakian Hungarians, the other one for Hungary. Besides, pamphlets were sent to Hungary, especially in Komárom and Nógrád counties, on behalf of Hungarian revolutionary organisations.⁵² Special editions of *Új Szó* appeared in several thousand copies (occasionally it exceeded the number of 10,000) until as late as 30th November. The paper usually had two pages. Special four-page editions were also published on 7th and 25th November. Articles on Hungary had been discussed with the ideology department of the party before publication: the voice of the Hungarian population in Slovakia did not appear in them; they served merely as a mouthpiece for the views and slogans of the Czechoslovak party leadership. Besides *Új Szó*, another paper, *Új Ifjúság* (New Youth) also issued a few special editions for publication in Hungary. Also, a few issues of *Északmagyarország* (Northern Hungary), a newspaper in Hungary, were printed in Košice due to the strike of printers in Hungary.

⁵² 16th January 1957. MNL OL, KÜM TÜK Czechoslovakia XIX-J-1 4/j, 14. d. 12/1957.

Shipping and selling of this paper was organised by Károly Grósz, later Prime Minister of Hungary.⁵³

The Czechoslovak press started to analyse the causes of the Hungarian revolution from 29th October. They pointed out serious economic mistakes as well as the division and uncertainty of the leadership. They warned workers to be cautious and said that *"the power of the working class cannot be risked"*. They called their own workers to keep unity and be perseverant, and they mentioned the incident on Wenceslas Square with praise: when provocation among the crowd was immediately choked and no trouble was made on 24th October.⁵⁴ On 29th October, *Új Szó* prophesied the victory of order for Hungary: *"The Hungarian people, led by the party, has victory over the counter-revolutionary gangs."* On 30th October, they began a campaign against Miklós Horthy with the title *"Horthy rule never again"*. They published an article on the same page which started with this sentence: *"We keep proletarian internationalism watchfully as the apple of our eye."* The Czechoslovak party leaders found it necessary that the Slovakian Hungarians also issue a declaration of loyalty. The faculty and students of the Hungarian Pedagogic School in Bratislava had to declare that: *"We assure the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia and the government of the republic that we stay firm by the Central Committee and the government. Under no circumstances shall we allow counter-revolutionary forces to disturb order in our country the Republic of Czechoslovakia. We want to retain close friendship with the Soviet Union and the states with people's democracy."*⁵⁵ 31st October was another landmark in the evaluation of the Hungarian events. Newspapers reported the proclamation of Imre Nagy that leaders of the 1945 coalition parties appeared in the new close cabinet. The Czechoslovak press commented this as green light towards a reactionary takeover.

On 1st November, *Rudé právo* reported the events with the title *"Tragic days in Hungary"* based on the reports of witnesses, journalists of Reuters and other agencies. The article outlined economic difficulties in Hungary, the great number of dead civilians, it reported the appearance of József Mindszenty and terrorist atrocities against

⁵³ KMECZKÓ, pp. 13–14.

⁵⁴ 30th January 1957. MNL OL, KÜM TÜK Czechoslovakia XIX-J-1-j 4/j, 14. d. 33/1957.

⁵⁵ *Új Szó*, 30th October 1956.

communists. From 1st November, witness reports appeared in *Új Szó* as well, about Budapest, certain regions of the country, the Czechoslovak–Hungarian border, and they often showed photos from Western newspapers about murdered Communists and ÁVH (State Protection Authority – the Hungarian Party Militia) members. In its issue of 2nd November, *Rudé právo* wrote that the position of Imre Nagy was in danger as counter-revolutionaries wanted to replace him with someone who could truly represent landholders and factory owners as well. The newspaper criticised the leniency of Imre Nagy towards counter-revolution. On 2nd November, *Új Szó* published the front-page article “The peoples of Hungary must decide”, in which they showed what cruelty Hungarian workers and peasants had to face during the white terror of Horthy. The article was completed with two pictures: one showed a modern scene in Budapest built by workers after the war, the other one recalled the 1940s: a family was evicted for not having paid the rent. This latter could be interpreted as a covert threat on the Slovakian Hungarians as it certainly could wake memories of a relocated Slovakian family. The possible message was: the Hungarians should bear in mind what future they could expect if they supported the revolution. On 3rd November, President Antonín Zápotocký gave a radio speech to the citizens of Czechoslovakia, which could also be read in *Rudé právo* on 4th November. The President explained that intervention in Hungary was inevitable. “Hungarian reaction, hand in hand with Western imperialists, started to implement its long-organised plan, which is not only against the people’s power but, in effect, against all Socialist countries and world peace.” Zápotocký acknowledged that numerous mistakes had been made in Hungary and he found it understandable that the Hungarian people tried to perfect the Socialist state and make former mistakes good. However, he continued, an irresponsible debate began in Hungary, which shook the construction of Socialism and, having generated faction debates, broke the unity of the Hungarian Workers’ Party and disabled its work. He put the blame on Imre Nagy for Hungary’s leaving the alliance of the Socialist countries.

Zápotocký also mentioned the position of Czechoslovakia, where, in spite of the attacks of the Capitalist press, there is tranquillity, political and economic stability. The reaction tried to attack economic stability in order to bring the country to the same fate as Hungary. Western states had sent several spy gangs to Czechoslovakia to achieve

this, but all had been caught. The President pointed out that Socialist democracy would be placed on wider fundamentals, which would ensure the constant rise of material and cultural demands as well as the participation of an ever widening layer of industrial workers, peasants and intellectuals in administration. "[W]e are not insane to give democratic rights to our enemies to jeopardize tranquillity and disturb the construction of Socialism in our country," he remarked with a threatening tone. "The words of Comrade Gottwald still apply to us today: we will not allow the destruction of the republic!" About the connection between Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union, he said: "Our people is expressing its firm trust towards the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia in these very days; the party drew correct conclusions from the 20th congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union at its national conference. The party turns the effort of millions of workers to the further prosperity of the country." He closed his speech with these words: "Let us continue on the road of struggle for peace and friendship among nations! Together with the Soviet Union forever!" The quoted Zápotocký speech also proves that the sample was given for the ultimate evaluation of events.

The 3rd November issue of *Új Szó* said that Hungary was under the threat of attack from clerical, reactionary and Horthy supporters. "The masses of the Hungarian people undoubtedly have a historic duty: to prevent the victory of reaction." On the same page, another title said: "The situation requires the people to turn against Horthy-Fascist elements firmly." Horthy's name sounded so bad in Czechoslovakia that Slovaks were ready to do anything against it. The article said that pro-Horthy officers and other Fascist agents were released from prison, and the staff of Horthy officers was formed in the Buda hills and they organised the bloodshed. "All this shows," the article explained "that a vicious, well-prepared and organised group trapped the working people of Hungary, which soon found itself under the attack of the forces of intervention [sic!] of foreign reaction. The people of Czechoslovakia assures the Hungarian workers of its warm, fraternal solidarity in this fight."⁵⁶

On the afternoon of 4th November and the morning of 5th November, all Czechoslovak daily papers published a special issue. They received the news of the fall of the "counter-revolution" with general release, and celebrated the victory of Soviet troops. They pointed out

⁵⁶ *Új Szó*, 3rd November 1956.

that the government of Imre Nagy fell apart and the Premier was a traitor. They recognised the Kádár Government from the first moment and assured it of their support. From 6th November 1956, *Rudé právo*, and later other papers as well, reported that Czechoslovak industrial and agricultural workers offered financial help to the workers of Hungary. Great quantities of food supply was sent to Hungary. Offers were continually mentioned in the press; photographs were taken of packing and shipping.⁵⁷ The 7th November issue of *Rudé právo* wrote that “they had not trusted the neutrality of the traitor Imre Nagy”, and they did not believe in the “neutrality of the Horthy oppressors and Hungarian Fascists”.⁵⁸ By referring to such ideas they tried to point out that Hungarian revisionism could demand the Hungarian-populated part of Slovakia again. The issues of the paper between 3rd and 7th November gradually turned towards the Suez Crisis and the situation in Hungary so this topic slowly disappeared from the press.

Signs of Sympathy during the Revolution

Many Czechs and Slovaks expressed their agreement with and sympathy towards the Hungarian events with acts. On 7th November 1956, a banner was hanged in a busy street of Ostrava with these words: “*Katyń – Warsaw – Hungary, the work of Soviet murderers.*”⁵⁹ Anti-government and anti-Soviet leaflets were found in Prague and other cities. In Plzeň, copies of one of Gomulka’s speeches with Free Europe heading were thrown into mailboxes on 12th November. Another leaflet demanded free elections and the re-trial of the Slánský case. In Nitra, police caught five students because they were distributing anti-Communist and anti-Soviet newspapers and leaflets. In late 1956, a group of seven university students was sentenced in Pardubice because they wanted to organise demonstrations against the regime during the Hungarian revolution. Czechoslovak police reports spoke about the consolidation of the situation and that no serious movements could be expected after the crushing of the Hungarian revolution. A report of 10th November in Brno said that the Hungarian revolution was not condemned in the censored letters,⁶⁰ which let them

⁵⁷ 20th February 1957. MNL OL, KÜM TŰK Czechoslovakia. XIX-J-1-k 23. d. 13/a/1957.

⁵⁸ *Rudé právo*, 7th November 1956.

⁵⁹ PERNES, p. 522.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 524.

think that many welcomed the Hungarian events there. In Bratislava, posters called people for the support of the Hungarian freedom fight; it became customary to greet each other with "Čépé" (we are waiting for a turn).⁶¹ At one of the railway stations of the city this text could be read: "*We want freedom and independence, death on Communism!*" Leaders mostly feared that the celebrations on the anniversary of the October Socialist revolution could be disturbed with troubles, and therefore preventive measures were taken all over the country. Suspicious people, familiar from former police lists, who they thought could cause problems, were gathered before the November procession. Six university students were arrested in Prague, who confessed that they had wanted to get arms from policemen on Wenceslas Square and began a revolt. In Plzeň, four medical students were caught, who had accumulated arms and medicine and spread news from Radio Free Europe.

On 4th November, in the vicinity of Tiszaágcsernyő, the upper cable of the railway that led towards the Soviet border was damaged by a mine, which was placed there by rebels from Hungary or their local supporters. Therefore, Soviet troops arriving from Csap (Čop) via Czechoslovakia had to march to Hungary on foot.⁶² On 7th November, about 25,000 people came together for the celebration in Prague; they received the news about putting down the Hungarian "counter-revolution" with acclamation. In late October and early November, due to the events in Hungary and the Suez Crisis, rumour spread in the country: the third world war was at hand, mobilization could soon be expected, food rationing would be introduced and Czech crown would be replaced by rubel. People began purchasing everything in large quantities: long-term utensils, especially food, sugar, flour, lard and soap. They were bought in twenty-, fifty- and one hundred-kilogram packs. There were long lines in front of shops. In a Czech village, police had to take action and separate women when panic broke out as people were afraid that there was not enough food for all. In Prague, people also began buying gold and silver. Authorities tried to stop the "reactionary propaganda" that a shortage of goods would come soon. President Zápotocký said in the radio that it was false informa-

⁶¹ Ibidem, p. 520.

⁶² L. BALOGH, 1956 Kárpátalján, in: *Napi Magyarország*, October 27, 1998.

tion spread by the enemy with the purpose of creating disorder. He explained that they would not have run out of food supply even if the population had spent all the money in circulation at once. The authorities ordered that goods had to be carried to shops on military lorries, and they could prevent shortage. The shopping fever decreased only after 10th November.

Also Czechoslovak party and government leaders drew conclusions from the Hungarian events. They brought forward the decrease of prices which was originally planned for 3rd December. Although the system of compulsory delivery was not abolished its conditions were lightened.

Czechoslovakian Assistance for Hungary

How did the Czechoslovak administration respond to the crushing of the Hungarian revolution? A report on Soviet victory was issued as early as 4th November. The CC of the CCP ordered Bratislava and the district party leaders to hold short meetings before the start of work on the following day. At these meetings, following the instructions of the party agents, workers made various offerings for the assistance of the Hungarians. Former political help was followed by economic help. The Political Committee of the CC of the CCP decided to establish a Solidarity Fund for the workers of the People's Republic of Hungary on 5th November 1956. The incomes were distributed through the Czechoslovakian Red Cross. The Czechoslovakian Youth Association, the Women's Movement and the National Committees helped to collect the donations. However, only 60 million crowns were collected instead of the planned 300 million. A government subsidy of 90 million crowns was added to this (calculated at retail price), which meant mostly electric power and shipping of goods.⁶³ After 5th November, Czechoslovak citizens were able to post parcels for private addresses. On 8th November, the CC of the CCP concluded that the population responded to the call of the leaders and assured the party of their support in thousands of letters. The Political Committee, at its 154th meeting of 12th November, accepted a letter addressed

⁶³ 20th February 1957. MNL OL, KÜM TŰK Czechoslovakia XIX-J-1-k 23. d 13/a/1957. A. POPÉLY, A Szlovák pártvezetés és az 1956-os Magyar Forradalom, in: E. IVANIČKOVÁ – A. SIMON (eds.), *Az 1956-os Magyar Forradalom és Szlovákia*, Somorja – Pozsony 2006, p. 62.

to János Kádár, in which they informed the Hungarian leader about the planned Czechoslovak help to Hungary (5,000 tons of flour, 5,000 tons of potato, 100 tons of meat, 5,000 tons of cement, 10,000 tons of lime, 325,000 square meters of roof cover material, 100,000 square meters of sheet-glass, 2,000 cubic metres of log, 3,000 cubic metres of plank and 3,600 tons of firewood; many medicine, textile articles, shoes, china, food and other consumer goods in the value of 32,4 million crowns).⁶⁴ The first government delegation to Budapest was led by the Prime Minister on 16th November 1956.⁶⁵ He went home with a contract of assistance of goods and promised help of any kind to the Kádár Government.⁶⁶ Later, the Czechoslovak Red Cross also gave help to dissidents returning from the West, who were able to travel through Czechoslovakia free of charge from January 1957. The Hungarian Foreign Ministry and the Czechoslovak Red Cross encouraged in their correspondence to distribute the donations according to the agreement between the two countries; they wanted thereby to prevent the Budapest mission of the International Red Cross from getting involved in the distribution.⁶⁷ They were afraid that the origin of transport of weapons for the Hungarian Communists would be revealed.

The party centre in Slovakia organised a propaganda squad from more than fifty Hungarian-speaking Slovaks, who organised meeting nearly every day in the settlements in the border area. Here the local people were supposed to declare their agreement with the party decisions. Slovakian local authorities were given certain autonomy in supporting and influencing the party leaders in the mostly Hungarian counties along the border.⁶⁸ As part of the assistance programme, weapons, clothes and food supply were transported, not only to settlements along the border, but also to Miskolc and Budapest. Lorry drivers and their escort were appointed from among Hungarian-speaking agents of national committees of territorial party committees but there were Hungarian-speaking volunteers as well. It was their task,

⁶⁴ 12th November 1956. MNL OL, XXXII-16 Czechoslovakia 11. d.

⁶⁵ *Népszabadság*, 17th November 1956.

⁶⁶ POPÉLY, *Fél évszázad*, p. 216.

⁶⁷ 24th January 1957. MNL OL, KÜM TŰK Czechoslovakia XIX-J-1-k 23.d 13/a 000156/1957.

⁶⁸ The report of the Hungarian Consulate in Bratislava on 3rd July 1957. MNL OL, KÜM TŰK, Czechoslovakia, XIX-J-32-a, 9. d. 47/1/1957.

beyond the transport, to get information and the “organisation” of the comrades in Hungary.

During the revolution, most Hungarian Communists and ÁVH members fled to the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia was the second most popular destination. They were warmly welcomed and provided with accommodation and catering⁶⁹ but they were also under observation. One attendant at the Hungarian Consulate in Bratislava heard that the Czechoslovak leaders were not pleased with every Hungarian comrade who arrived from Hungary in October 1956. A lot of Hungarian comrades did not want to return at all due to the developments. *“There were only a few who came, discussed problems and returned to fight.”*⁷⁰ In Slovakia, students as well as the headmasters of the Hungarian schools in Komarno and Bratislava were called to account for various acts of solidarity. In one class, Nemzeti dal (National Song – a patriotic poem by Sándor Petőfi, one of the symbols of the 1848 revolution and national independence) was recited on 15th March 1957, after which police went to the school and interrogations were held for days. The headmaster was labelled nationalist and dismissed. For years, state and party authorities considered it a proof of reliability what viewpoint one adopted during these days. Until early November 1956, 220 Hungarians were taken to one of the prisons in Bratislava.⁷¹ This number probably includes those Hungarian citizens who wanted to cross the border to Austria near Rajka and got to Czechoslovak territory by mistake. The other captives were possibly Slovakian Hungarians who agitated in support of the revolution in October 1956 or tried to cross the border and fight as a freedom fighter in Hungary. One of the assistants at the Hungarian Consulate in Bratislava paid a visit of introduction to the president of the Body of Commissioners, Rudolf Strechaj, on 29th July 1957, when his host told him that the counter-revolution had had no significant disruptive effect in Slovakia, and this, he emphasised, applies to the Slovakian Hungarians as well. To his best knowledge, 43 ethnic Hungarians were arrested during the counter-revolution, most of whom had for-

⁶⁹ G. DUBA, *Örvénylő idő*, Pozsony 1982, p. 344.

⁷⁰ Report of the Hungarian Consulate in Bratislava. 2nd June 1957. MNL OL, KÜM TÚK Czechoslovakia XIX-J-32-a, 9. d. 47/3/1957.

⁷¹ SZESZTAY, p. 39.

merly been landowners or officers in the Horthy army.⁷² There were 5,757 Hungarian citizens in Czechoslovakia on 23rd October 1956. After 28th November 1956, 5,010 returned to Hungary, 392 remained in Czechoslovakia and 353 left for other countries. Between 23rd October and 28th November 1956, 1367 people crossed the border illegally.⁷³ Until December 1956, 665,⁷⁴ according to another source 674,⁷⁵ people were prosecuted. To determine the exact number requires further research.

Summary

In 1956, the authorities in Czechoslovakia successfully prevented any possible revolt. It can be stated that peace was not seriously disturbed in both the Czech and the Slovak territories, and no significant movement took place. A Czech journalist summarised the behaviour of the people with these words: *"In Communist Poland, people were collecting medicine and blood-plasma to send them to the Hungarian rebels, while the Czechs were playing the lottery and the people in Bratislava went to a hockey match."*⁷⁶

Czechoslovakia pulled through the critical year of 1956 and she got stronger. A movement similar to the Hungarian revolution did not occur in the country because the economic situation was far better and the standard of living was considerably higher here. As a consequence of stability, the events in Poland and Hungary did not elicit serious clashes in Czechoslovakia. The other important reason was the quick, determined and united action of the leadership; a weaker government could not have handled the situation so successfully. The hurry was justified; they had every reason to fear that if Hungary succeeded in leaving the Socialist bloc, the Hungarian minority would be a constant source of unrest in Czechoslovakia. Therefore, it was their primary interest to see the revolution crushed and order restored as soon as pos-

⁷² The report of the Hungarian Consulate in Bratislava on 29th July 1957. MNL OL, KÜM TÜK Czechoslovakia XIX-j-32-a, 9 d. 47/5/1957.

⁷³ MARUŠIAK, p. 102.

⁷⁴ HAJDU, p. 130.

⁷⁵ P. GERMUSKA, Najnovšie poznatky o maďarskej revolúcii roku 1956 a maďarsko-slovenské vzťahy roku 1956, in: M. ŠTEFANSKÝ – M. ZÁGORŠEKOVÁ (eds.), *Krizy režimov sovietskeho bloku v rokoch 1948–1989*, Banská Bystrica 1997, p. 161.

⁷⁶ PERNES, p. 524.

sible. The speech of the Chief Editor of *Rudé právo*, V. Koucký given at the district conference of the CCP, in Karlovy Vary in March 1957, proves this: "[I]f the Soviet Army had been unable to give assistance for any reason, we would have helped the Hungarian working class in a similar manner."⁷⁷ Koucký was the leader of the CC delegation of the CCP at the conference. The Political Committee of the CCP responded to the Hungarian events extremely quickly; they came together and made decisions on the following day. Czechoslovak society was not prepared for a political change in the 1950s; this happened only in the late 1960s. In Czechoslovakia, the writers' association and later the Youth Association and the intellectuals generated most of the problems. The state administration managed, with preventive measures, to get the youth to keep away from any "reactionary" act. Although the question of legality of the János Kádár government was brought up at discussions as well as the justifiability of the Soviet invasion, but expressing opposition to these ideas brought about reprisals. The Hungarian population in Slovakia could choose between minority status and survival or revolt. Sober consideration excluded open support of the Hungarian revolution. Memories of the reprisals after 1945 were still quite vivid among the Hungarians, and the charge of irredentism was also dangerous. Therefore, any kind of resistance or rebellion was meaningless. The Hungarian minority in Czechoslovakia had to pay the price for guilt at any turning points of Czechoslovak and Hungarian history: in 1918, 1938, 1945 and 1948. In 1956, they had a choice. The Hungarians did not have any significant movements except for a few isolated cases. They chose passive resistance. Still, it could be seen that the idea of Hungarian liberty could have been a motivating force under more favourable circumstances. After the 1956 events, those who openly supported the revolution were punished in Czechoslovakia as well, but the whole national minority could not be punished collectively. It was not in the interest of Czechoslovakia any more, nor could it harmonize with the policy of the Soviet Union as a great power.

⁷⁷ The speech of V. Koucký at the conference of the CC of the CCP on 16th–17th March 1957. NA, Praha, AÚV KSČ fond 19/1, a. j. 3398.